Judith Leyster, Self-Portrait

Judith Leyster was a well-known painter of the Dutch Baroque period. While she is considered a Baroque artist, in this painting she does not deal with popular themes such as religion. This is due to the fact that the Netherlands had recently broken free from Spanish rule, and had become an independent region. Protestantism was the predominant religion, and because of this, the Church was not commissioning artists. This allowed artists to tackle other subject matters. During this time and in this region, art was made for the merchant class. There was a large immigrant community of skilled workers that came to the Netherlands. This influenced the style of art that was produced, because artists had to cater to their audiences. The main goal of aspiring artists in this region was to become a part of the guild. This would help a new artist gain students, experience, and a platform to sell their work. Judith Leyster was the first woman to be accepted to the Guild of St. Luke. Because she was a member of the guild, she was given all the same career and educational advantages that the other male artists were. She was accepted into the guild in 1633, the same year that this painting was commissioned. Originally, the image the women in the painting is working on was indeed a true self portrait. However, one could postulate that due to Leyster’s recent success in the Guild of St. Luke, she decided to change the image. The image that the painted woman is painting was a very common image during the Baroque period. Depictions of musicians were very common during this time. Many famous painters tackled this subject matter. The choice to include the musician in the painting and no a self-portrait could be a based on a decision to demonstrate her artistic abilities as a painter. Women in this time period were known for painting flowers, landscapes, and still life images. By choosing to paint a musician, Leyster is challenging the social norms of Dutch Baroque artists.

Leyster was working on her these paintings at the same time that another painter, Frans Hals, who similarly painted close up depictions of painters. Leyster was alive during the Dutch Golden Age. This period lasted for most of the 1600s. This was a time filled with innovation. There were huge advancements in science, art, architecture, and literature. Leyster painted Self-Portrait during the Eighty Years’ War in the Netherlands. This war, which was fought from 1568 to 1648, was between the Netherlands and Spain. Specifically, the Netherlands was fighting in order to themselves from Spanish control of government, and religion. One of the causes of this war was the strict Spanish attempt to integrate Catholicism into the beliefs of individuals in the Netherlands. The fight against religion speaks to the lack of religious themes explored by Leyster in her work. During Leyster’s time, women had very limited rights. They did not have nearly the same amount of educational opportunities that men had. Because of this, Leyster being accepted into the Guild of St. Luke was a great accomplishment, and one to be celebrated.

Leyster’s Self-Portrait, while not one of her first pieces, is one of her most famous. Many have noted the confident manner in which Leyster as depicted in the painting is looking out of the canvas. This can be connected to the choice to demonstrate her artistic abilities by painting a subject matter not typically attributed to women. Overall, many societal and historical aspects influenced the work of Leyster, and by extension, her painting Self-Portrait.